



From words to deeds by Leon Trotsky

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Below appears the first published English translation of Trotsky's article 'From words to deeds'(1). Seventy years after its appearance in the paper *Vpered* (Forward) on 28 June 1917 (2) it remains a key document in the history of Trotsky's convergence with Lenin's party.

Vpered was the paper of the Inter-District Organisation of United Social Democrats, the so-called *Mehraiontsi*. This had been founded in 1913 by Yurenev and other members of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) who rejected the discipline of both Bolshevik and Menshevik wings of the party. As Yurenev wrote later: 'In particular we refused to recognise the Bolshevik conference of 1912 as a conference of the entire RSDLP.'(3) Their initial project was to unify the Bolsheviks and the Left Mensheviks in a party of 'United Internationalists'.

This project corresponded in many ways with that of Trotsky between 1907 and 1916. From the moment of the 1903 split Trotsky had taken up a position on the extreme left of Menshevism, hoping that on the objective pressure of revolutionary events would propel Menshevism in a revolutionary direction (as it had briefly done during 1905). After 1914 Trotsky's 'Menshevik conciliationism' was extended to the international arena, placing him in an intermediate and conciliatory position between the social-pacifist 'centre' and the revolutionary defeatist left at the Zimmerwald anti-war conference of 1915.

But the war and the Russian revolutionary upsurge revealed ever more clearly in practice Menshevism's inability to evolve in a revolutionary direction. By May 1917, on Trotsky's return to Russia, the Mensheviks had entered the coalition government alongside the capitalist and petit bourgeois parties, immediately devoting their energies to whipping up the workers' flagging support for the capitalist war effort.

On his return Trotsky immediately joined the *Mehraiontsi*. In 1914 they had numbered 350. In early 1917 they started off with only 150 members. Now, although individual Left Mensheviks and some ex-Bolsheviks joined?they included Lunacharsky, Joffe, Uritsky, Riazanov and Volodarsky?the *Mehraiontsi* did not experience the spectacular growth of the Bolshevik Party. In April 1917, whilst Stalin and Kamenev had led the Bolsheviks in support for the bourgeois provisional government and the war, the *Mehraiontsi* had argued for a new insurrection and for Soviet power. By the time Trotsky arrived in Petrograd, however, Lenin had completed the fight against the 'old Bolshevik' line of Kamenev and Stalin elaborating the slogan 'All power to the Soviets' in his famous April Theses. There was now no political difference between the *Mehraiontsi* and the Bolsheviks. As Deutscher writes:

'At public meetings the *Mehraiontsi*'s agitators were insistently asked in what they differed from the Bolsheviks and why they did not join hands with them. To this question they had in truth no satisfactory answer.'(4)

On 10 May Lenin, Kamenev and Zinoviev met Trotsky and the leaders of the *Mehraiontsi* proposing immediate fusion with positions on the Bolshevik leading bodies and the editorial board of *Pravda*. Commenting that since the April Theses he was in complete political agreement with Lenin, Trotsky however, prevaricated. But throughout May and June observed that what he labelled the Bolshevik's sectarianism ('clannishness') was eroded by the mass influx of revolutionary workers into the Party. By the time of this article we see Trotsky preparing to fuse with the Bolsheviks and fighting against Yurenev's conciliationism. This process was foreshortened by the period of reaction that followed the July Days.(5) Lenin fled into hiding, whilst Trotsky was imprisoned. It was during this period that Trotsky 'joined' the Bolsheviks, consenting, from his cell, to being elected to the Central Committee in August.

On 1 November 1917 Lenin remarked, during a Central Committee meeting of the Bolshevik Party, that since Trotsky had broken with his attempts to conciliate with Menshevism ? . . . there has been no better Bolshevik?. (6)This article represents the clearest moment of that break. Its title, ?From Words to Deeds? was not just an exhortation to the reluctant Mehraiontsi. It was a symbol of Trotsky?s own transformation from Left Menshevik publicist and orator to leader of a revolutionary combat party.The translation is by Dave Hughes.

It is already one and a half months since the conference of the Petrograd Inter-District organisation but the issue of the unification of the internationalists has not advanced one step further. More than that: whoever was present at the conference and witnessed the prevailing mood there would say that we were closer to unity than we are now. Then, in every sense, it appeared to be a practical task. Now it is too often turned into a pious phrase that doesn?t bind us to any practical conclusions.

It was established at the conference that we do not have principled differences with the Bolsheviks. We have arrived at one and the same conclusions on all the fundamental questions posed by the war, the revolution and the international. But, a separate organisational existence can be justified only by deep programmatic or practical difference; in the absence of such differences the conclusion necessarily follows: full organisational merger. [emphasis in original]

True, at the conferences difficulties were pointed to flowing from the habits and methods of Bolshevik clannishness. Of course, it is impossible to deny these difficulties that not infrequently even now appear in a highly unattractive form in the organisational policy of the Central Committee and in the pages of Pravda. But at the same time, at the conference, comrade Lunacharsky showed absolutely correctly that in the conditions of the open existence of a mass workers? party this clannishness is meeting powerful counter-pressures. In any event, given the lack of principled differences, it is impossible to fight against clannish methods except through opposing them within the bounds of a common organisation?that is by more democratic methods of conducting party work. To artificially preserve a separate organisation for the purpose of a struggle against clannishness would be to create the conditions for our own clannishness on a smaller scale. Without a doubt the Inter-District Organisation faces this danger.

In Vpered No3 comrade Yurenev saw one of the benefits of delaying steps towards unification by referring to the Menshevik-Internationalists.

?Unity?, he writes, ?for us is unacceptable in the form of a separate organisational merger with the comrade Bolsheviks. Despite the fact that we coincide with them on the central questions posed by the revolution, it would be mistaken not to exhaust all possibilities for the establishment of one single revolutionary social democracy, by merging immediately. On a Petersburg scale this would be a plus, on an all Russian scale it would be a minus. We see the way out not in such a merger but in the joint preparation of a general all-Russian conference of internationalists.?

It is fundamentally wrong to pose the issue this way. The question is not of a separate merger with the Bolsheviks but precisely of unification with the Bolsheviks. This type of unification is already prepared by preceding developments. The principled basis for it is formulated in our resolutions. All our work in Petrograd is conducted in the form of separate cooperation with the Bolsheviks. The problem now is whether the organisational separation is disorganising and disrupting this common political work. Comrade Yurenev himself recognises that for Petrograd such a unification would be a plus. He thinks, however, that it would be a minus for the provinces.

The Inter-District Organisation is above all a Petrograd organisation. Consequently without a doubt the unification of internationalist forces would be the biggest gain for the Petrograd movement. This can in no way be compared with any damage such a Petrograd unification would bring to the provinces. A plus for Petrograd in present conditions, when ?Petrograd? is experiencing furious persecution by all counter-revolutionary elements, cannot but have a decisive character for us.

How could this present a danger to the provinces? It is the view of Comrade Yurenev that it would obviously do so.

The provinces lag behind Petrograd. The political groups there are still mainly shapeless. Perhaps the provincial internationalists who want to break with the defencists cannot choose to side with the Bolsheviks but would rather side with united internationalists.

Such reasoning would have been more or less convincing were we a simple bloc of 'internationalists' siding neither with the Bolsheviks nor the Mensheviks. But this is not the case. We rallied round a definite platform which does not differ from the Bolsheviks. In such conditions the maintenance of our organisation separate from the Bolsheviks is capable only of setting back and confusing the provinces. This can never be counted as a plus. Generally it would have been naïve to think, when all issues are posed so sharply, that political groups in the working class or its socialist vanguard can be based on secondary features of an inner party character.

'But the party of a social democratic internationalists', says comrade Yurenev, 'cannot conceive of itself as a sect organised completely without any Mensheviks. And even if the Menshevik Internationalists differ from us on the question of the organisation of power' there is the possibility of common work with them, and the possibility and necessity of unity.'

That the party should not be a sect is absolutely correct. But unfortunately this general idea does not answer the questions facing us. If someone had proposed a vote on unity with the Bolsheviks and the Menshevik Internationalists or only with the Bolsheviks and we should have chosen the latter option then we could talk of sectarianism. But in reality none of us proposed such a vote. The Menshevik Internationalists have nowhere indicated their preparedness for unity with us. On the contrary, they particularly distinguish themselves from the position held in common between us and the Bolsheviks on the fundamental question facing the revolution—the seizure of power. Not only do they not break with their defencists in order to fuse with us and the Bolsheviks, on the contrary they emphasise in every way that which separated them from us. They restrict their tactics within the terms of the Menshevik defencist organisation, allowing themselves no independent political action. If we, in our turn, were to base our work for unification on the evolution of relations between the Menshevik fractions this would mean turning our back on unified elements already of one mind in the name of preferred elements who display no willingness to fuse with us. Any time the supporters of comrade Martov could have seen their way to unite with us and the Bolsheviks—and we would have welcomed this—both for us and the Mensheviks it would have made no difference whether we were separate from the Bolsheviks or in an united organisation, united on the basis of a platform of revolutionary activity.

More important for us is the matter of the comparatively wide layers of workers who still look to the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. We can presume that these more backward masses will be pushed to the side of revolutionary socialism through the logic of their position and putting the government's policies to the test—first of all the test of the offensive!

Each day the most oppressed layer of the peasantry and petit bourgeoisie will, starting in the army, put to the test their disappointment with the policies of the coalition government and seek a revolutionary outcome. These masses need clear, straightforward and simple political groups. The camp of petit bourgeois defencism must be answered by a united camp of revolutionary socialism. For the provinces—if we are talking of the provincial masses and not the provincial circles—the separate existence of the united internationalists and the Bolsheviks is not a plus but a minus.

On the question of unity it is time to pass from words to deeds. Along with the joint preparation of a general congress of internationalists it is now already necessary to secure the organisational unity of spoken and printed agitation and a fundamental unity of political action.

Comrade Yurenev says that unity must be created, not from above, but from below. This is correct when it is necessary to use pressure from below to speed unity at the top. I think that for the Petrograd workers, Bolshevik and Inter-District, now is the time to energetically come together.

2 Old calendar

3 O Yurenev, ?Mezhaionka?, Proletarskaya Revolyutsiya No1

4 Deutscher, The Prophet Armed, p255 (Oxford, 1970)

5 See Workers Power No 95, June 1987

6 L Trotsky, The Stalin School of Falsification, p105 (New York, 1973)

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